

GREG: That's what the women thought, and that made them nervous, so they did get poor results. But actually they were wrong ... No one was making any assumptions about the female students at all. Q23

LISA: Anyway, what Miyake's team did was quite simple – getting the students to do some writing before they went into the physics class. What did they call it?

GREG: Values-affirmation – they had to write an essay focusing on things that were significant to them, not particularly to do with the subject they were studying, but more general things like music, or people who mattered to them. Q24

LISA: Right. So the idea of doing the writing is that this gets the students thinking in a positive way.

GREG: And putting these thoughts into words can relax them and help them overcome the psychological factors that lead to poor performance. Yeah. But what the researchers in the study hadn't expected was that this one activity raised the women's physics grades from the C to the B range. Q25
Q26

LISA: A huge change. Pity it wasn't to an A, but still! No, but it does suggest that the women were seriously underperforming beforehand, in comparison with the men.

GREG: Yes. Mind you, Miyake's article left out a lot of details. Like, did the students do the writing just once, or several times? And had they been told why they were doing the writing? That might have affected the results. Q27

LISA: You mean, if they know the researchers thought it might help them to improve, then they'd just try to fulfil that expectation?

GREG: Exactly.

GREG: So anyway, I thought for our project we could do a similar study, but investigate whether it really was the writing activity that had that result.

LISA: OK. So we could ask them to do a writing task about something completely different ... something more factual? Like a general knowledge topic.

GREG: Maybe ... or we could have half the students doing a writing task and half doing something else, like an oral task.

LISA: Or even, half do the same writing task as in the original research and half do a factual writing task. Then we'd see if it really is the topic that made the difference, or something else. Q28

GREG: That's it. Good. So at our meeting with the supervisor on Monday we can tell him we've decided on our project. We should have our aims ready by then. I suppose we need to read the original study – the article's just a summary.

LISA: And there was another article I read, by Smolinsky. It was about her research on how women and men perform in mixed teams in class, compared with single-sex teams and on their own.

GREG: Let me guess ... the women were better at teamwork.

LISA: That's what I expected, but actually the men and the women got the same results whether they were working in teams or on their own. But I guess it's not that relevant to us. Q29

GREG: What worries me anyway is how we're going to get everything done in the time.

LISA: We'll be OK now we know what we're doing. Though I'm not clear how we assess whether the students in our experiment actually make any progress or not ...

GREG: No. We may need some advice on that. The main thing's to make sure we have the right size sample, not too big or too small.

LISA: That shouldn't be difficult. Right, what do we need to do next? We could have a look at the timetable for the science classes ... or perhaps we should just make an appointment to see one of the science professors. That'd be better. Q30

GREG: Great. And we could even get to observe one of the classes.

LISA: What for?

GREG: Well ... OK maybe let's just go with your idea. Right, well ...